

Touching on the Past  
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Snow flies in October in central Montana. It seldom piles drifts up so early in the season, but on those open plains, when the wind is just right, it can slap your face with icy pellets. My Montana friend Stu Connor and I drove into Grass Range with those pellets dinging the windshield of his Landrover.

Grass Range became a town just over a hundred years ago when the Milwaukee Railroad strung tracks across this never-ending landscape. Not much is left on Main Street, but we find a run-down bar and restaurant. We sit in a back booth and order coffee. Men and women walk in and out in chaps, western hats, and heavy jackets. Some are local hunters. Antelope season just opened, and we saw several pick up trucks parked outside, piled high with gutted carcasses. Other customers, the ones with clanging spurs, have been working cattle. The scene might call to mind Texas, but there are no Texas drawls here. Grass Range, Montana, in the upper west of the United States, is east of the Rocky Mountains but not too many miles south of the Canadian border. This place and Alberta, Canada, just across that invisible international boundary, have a lot in common including the accents. But Stu and I are not here to enjoy the Sunday afternoon scene in the local watering hole. Stu is an expert on Rock Art, pictographs and petroglyphs (that is, paintings and etchings in the cliff rock) made by Indian ancestors who lived here thousands of years ago. Tomorrow we will head for Bear Gulch on private ranchland.

The land here is not flat but instead undulates with huge rolling hills covered in rich grass and thick stands of pine trees at the higher elevations. Lowland creek banks blaze with golden quaking aspens this time of year. Creeks have chopped their paths through ancient limestone beds here creating high-walled stratified canyons that become shallower and narrower in the uplands and finally peter out entirely in the higher country. Bear Gulch is one of these canyons. Rain has turned the furrowed roads to slippery, sticky muck. We

chance it, putting our vehicle in four-wheel drive and its lowest gear and cautiously grinding our way down the two ruts that make a road to the canyon floor. The crevasse is several hundred yards across, and the white walls soar abruptly on either side. There is bear scat everywhere. The bears are feeding on the ripe chokecherries, gorging themselves before the winter sleep. We sing loudly to alert them. Surprised bears are dangerous bears. We climb the rubble up to the cliff face through overgrown bushes and bramble.

There are at least seven hundred pictographs and petroglyphs painted or incised on the cliffs. Most are, stick figures carrying shields that cover their entire torsos, shield-bearing warriors painted with a red paint made of clay and a fixative, blood or glue-like residue from animal hides. Both the blood and glue are organic and hence can be carbon dated. The shadowy, faded drawings are hundreds to thousands of years old. Some have embellishments in yellow, black, or even green. Over there is a life-sized red handprint. Here, one of the many paintings that appear to emerge from deep cracks in the cliff walls as if they were external emanations of internal spirits, as indeed they are. Stu is reverential as if we are in a sacred space. "How can you be certain," I ask, teasing him a little, "that these rock art shields are not just ancient graffiti?" "Because," he says, "I have interviewed many contemporary Indians, and the tradition of the spiritual power of individual shields persists in native culture." In historic Indian culture, shields were intended to protect their bearers, defending their carriers with the spiritual power imbedded by their makers.

Several years ago I interviewed my adopted Indian mother, Evelyne Wahinni, a Comanche living near St. Louis. We talked about an exquisite Comanche shield in the collections of the Missouri Historical Society. "Evelyne," I said, "did the shield maker incorporate his own memories and vision into the object?" "Now the shield itself," she replied, "you and I know that an arrow could pierce it. A gun bullet could pierce it. But it was the protective spiritual circle that surrounded the user of the shield, and that was where the power came from, that was where the help came from." Later she told me; "It's almost like the shield isn't just material lying there. The shield's got a life, a heartbeat, it's alive for you, and this is just the feeling you have." For Evelyne every artifact contains

the spirit of its maker. Quilt makers tell me the same thing. Just as the shield bearer's power is embedded in the shield, so too the quiltmaker's spirit is embedded in a handmade quilt. If we are upset or angry or depressed when we try to create anything, it will not turn out right. It is true of a shield or a quilt or a favorite recipe. We in museum work must ask ourselves: Can we acknowledge the spiritual power imbedded in our collections and then imagine how this transformation can influence our work?

The minds that gave impetus to the stirring images on the cliffs are gone. No living person will ever sit with the painters and ask the questions. While we may surmise the meanings of the rock art, we will never know for certain. Yet we do not dismiss the paintings as devoid of meaning and irrelevant. I shivered at the cliff face, and not from Montana's autumn wind. My emotions rose. Hairs on the back of my neck stood up. Here is visual proof of the existence of others unlike me in so many ways yet my hand matches the one on the wall exactly. I do not need a label to appreciate this artifact. I do not need a guide. I just need to see. I am connected, not because I am historian or because I work in a museum, but rather because I am human. Part of me knows that there is a kind of magic afoot and that there are sacred places. We can study and interpret objects, but in the end their power rests in their ability to evoke a visceral connection with other people in other places in other times.

Earlier this year I was eating supper with friends, several of whom are Indian. We were discussing American explorers like Lewis and Clark who had ventured into the lands west of the Mississippi River. Alan Pinkham is an elder of the Nez Perce, a tribe defeated by the U.S. Army and confined to a reservation in the state of Idaho in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Alan told us a story. Once upon a time a Nez Perce man walked east from his homelands in the northwest of what we call the United States of America. He walked all the way where the city of Cincinnati is now and then down to the Gulf of Mexico. He headed west and reached the Arizona deserts and then veered north all the way to the Columbia River and walked east until he once again was home. He left when he was a very young man but was in his forties when he completed his continental circuit.

When he finished his story, a white man at the table said, "Alan, you must write the stories down so that they will be remembered, accessible and preserved." This idea of writing down traditional stories is an old but important debate. When we put things in books, archives, and museums, we relieve most people of the necessity of taking care of the past, and we make preservation into a professional activity practiced by curators, librarians, archivists, and experts in other disciplines. When we shelve the past, we can forget it. Should we shelve the past, or should we simply keep track of important evidence of it, advise on its preservation and be repositories of last resort for important things that no longer have a home? What of grandmothers, grandfathers, prophets, and elders? They still speak although not with their ancient authority nor with the audience they used to have.

I am thinking of a red clay doll made by Hopi people who live in Arizona. The doll is usually a woman, cloth and features outlined in black. She is seated. Her mouth is wide open. She is speaking. Children sit on her lap, climb on her shoulders, hang from her hair, dangle from her arms. They are listening. She tells the stories. Through her stories the children become Hopi. She is the grandmother-historian-archivist -priest-curator-beloved elder. She carries the past into the present and future. These three concepts are inseparable and omnipresent. Time is not an arrow hurtling into the future but more like pond ripples. The storyteller is not about change. She is about persistence. She is about what really matters.

These ideas are not alien. Pulitzer Prize winning author Jeffrey Eugenides captured the idea in marvelous prose in his book *Middlesex*. (p425)

I hadn't gotten old enough yet to realize that living sends a person not into the future but back into the past, to childhood and before birth, finally, to commune with the dead. You get older, you puff on the stairs, you enter the body of your father. From there it is only a quick jump to your grandparents, and then before you know it you're time-traveling. In this life we grow backwards. It is always the gray-haired tourists on Italian buses who can tell you something about the Etruscans.

Who is the curator? Who defines the meanings of objects? Where are the experts? Who has authority? Every museum visitor is a storyteller with authority. Every evocative object on exhibit is a mnemonic device. Every visitor interaction is story-making as visitors fit portions of our collections into personal frames of reference; most often in ways we neither intended nor anticipated. Visitors rummage through our galleries searching for pertinent objects. The 1950s' and 60s' American craze for pink or turquoise did not invade my parents' house. My parents had white appliances in our kitchen: stove, refrigerator, dishwasher, and sink. They eschewed fads of all kinds, but the garish kitchens invaded plenty of other homes, testimony to post-war affluence, suburbanization, and marketing genius.

American fascination with automobile culture and the flight to new post-war suburbs remade America's urban landscape. Houses popped up in staggering numbers in new suburbs beyond the city. We attempted to evoke this transformation in a gallery in the Missouri History Museum. One of the devices we used was a recreated "pink kitchen." We thought, I seem to remember, that this would provide a venue for exploration of the consequences of the exodus to suburbia. One day I stood unobtrusively near the exhibit. Family members from several different generations arrived. I listened intently. There was no discussion of suburbia, no reading of labels, hardly a comment on the pinkness of the surroundings. The conversation was about recipes, family gatherings around the dinner table, grandmothers and mothers and the stories they told as they washed the dishes. And it was about family ties. The exhibit became a memory place that reinforced those ties because it stimulated personal remembrance and strengthened remembrance through repetition. Museums are not classrooms. Our experiences here are far less structured, much more visitor defined, with unpredictable outcomes. How can we structure exhibits to really enhance visitor experiences and to acknowledge that those of us who work in museums cannot dictate interpretation?

Lawrence K. Roos, a St. Louis civic leader, died shortly after I interviewed him on videotape earlier this year. He was eighty-seven and had advanced

inoperable stomach cancer. He drove himself to my office, walked upstairs, sat down, and let me interview him for several hours. We talked about a remarkable career of community service and a life devoted to family. At the end he told me that he was dying with no regrets. "Looking back at my life," he said, "how could anyone ask for more?" The only thing he hoped for at this end was "to die without suffering." And he said, "His doctors had promised him a soft landing." The interview ended as Larry told me how flattered he was that the President of the Historical Society thought his life story was worth recording. As we walked out I asked him how many copies of the DVD he wanted. He counted his children and grandchildren. "Ten will be enough," he said softly. Just ten days later I walked downstairs to make early morning coffee in my kitchen, opened the morning paper, and was startled by the picture of Larry Roos and the obituary beneath it.

His grandchildren called me after the funeral. Larry had given each of them a copy of the video disk. It was his last testament, his last gift. I intended the interview to become a research document for those who in the future would be interested in this man's remarkable life. I had failed to anticipate the more important consequences. In just doing the interview I provided added validation for Larry Roos's life. Most importantly I facilitated the creation of a final gift for those who knew and loved him. The subjective consequences of what we do often outweigh the objective and tangible. Can we assign greater priority to the qualitative and emotional components of our work? Can we always make room for the serendipitous and embrace the unpredictable?

St. Louis, my city, has a tortured racial past that continues to infest public and private life. Race and class are so intertwined as to be inseparable in my mind. But race and class are impressed on the city's landscape as if some red-hot branding iron had once descended from our Midwestern skies and seared division onto the landscape just as a cow's hide is indelibly branded in the animal's youth. The strict segregation laws are all off the books now, but our city remains intensely segregated. These divisions persist because of our civic incapacity to work on issues together, and reservoirs of mistrust and anger based on ignorance, misunderstanding, and hate are propped up by the way we tell

our stories. St. Louis stories are told differently depending on the race and class of the narrator. Sometimes stories do not even have intersections. Several years ago we did a spectacular exhibit on jazz and blues great Miles Davis. One morning a woman stopped me in the lobby of the Missouri History Museum and asked, "Why in the world would you do an exhibition on Miles Davis?" Now Miles Davis was African American, and he surely was not of unblemished character. I thought the woman was angry that we would give a misogynistic black man the stage so I was prepared for a tough exchange. I began. "Ma'am," I said, "Miles Davis was from St. Louis." "Oh," she replied, "that explains it," and then she walked away. She was white, and she was from St. Louis. Her St. Louis story did not include our native son Miles Davis although it surely included Charles Lindbergh and Thomas Jefferson. Her story did not include the East St. Louis race riots of 1917 although nearly every African American narrative of life in our part of the Mississippi Valley retells that bloody and frightening story of berserk racial behavior in which more than fifty African Americans were shot or hung in days of rage.

So we tell different stories. We travel different streets. We live in different neighborhoods. We go to different schools. But in a larger, more radical way we are victims of unshared stories, conflicting stories, exclusive stories. These stories are at odds over really important things like justice, fairness, democracy, politics, future expectations and aspirations, and the causes of poverty. If we are to become healthier places, we will have to talk to each other and we must find more elements in common for our stories. We must learn each other's histories. Only then will we understand that sometimes when people disagree, no one is lying. Only then will we have sufficient capacity to shape a coherent future that we will be proud to bequeath to our children. Good communities require broadly shared aspirations built upon common understanding of those burdens and legacies bequeathed from the past. If we cannot agree on what has been done well and what has been done poorly, we cannot determine a future course of action.

Now I know that because we are all different and distinct, we tell different stories and attach different meanings to a shared past. But people who

live together must create narratives with common elements. My sister and I have very different understandings of our shared childhood, yet there are enough shared elements to enable us to discuss the past with common agreement on most big things. Communities with unshared or exclusive stories cannot agree on big things, even those things we absolutely must do together to create really good, healthy, sustainable places for ourselves and our children. But narratives cannot be imposed. They must be informally agreed upon through unstructured civic discourse. I believe that museums can become preeminent venues for these conversations that really matter. We can be safe places for people and for ideas. We can be the twenty-first century town squares.

One of the main buildings occupied by my own institution was built in 1913 as America's first memorial to Thomas Jefferson, the third President of the United States, author of the Declaration of Independence, and the president who authorized the purchase of the Louisiana Territory. The building is a mundane beaux arts building erected on the site of what was the main entrance to the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition, St. Louis' 1904 World's Fair. The building originally had an open loggia, subsequently enclosed by glass walls, that houses a heroic, much bigger than life statue of Thomas Jefferson. The building and the statue were erected when the community's elites dictated public architecture and canonized its heroes. It is a community landmark familiarly known as the Jefferson Memorial Building. Buildings too are objects and as they age they become artifacts. The architecture of this building and the huge statue of the enigmatic Jefferson combine to produce a powerful message about who counts and who matters and what might be enshrined inside. There is nothing about this building that says, "This is your place" to African Americans who comprise more than fifty percent of my city's population. While the contents of the exhibition halls inside of the building have changed to be more inclusive, its exterior appearance has not. No exhibition or program can completely overcome the powerful message embodied in the building and statue.

The architectural antecedents of this building are Greek and Roman. Many Americans, especially those of European descent simply accept the notion that classical forms derived from Greco-Roman antecedents are the appropriate

architecture with which to commemorate heroes and to enclose public spaces like museums. For them Jefferson is one of the extraordinary founders of his nation, endowed with unparalleled perspicacity and acumen. Yet for those whose ancestors endured the whips and chains of slavery, classical architecture neither represents their traditions nor does it conjure respect for Greco-Roman buildings and the nascent seeds of democracy nurtured in the agora. Instead, for their ancestors it symbolized a western culture in which they were chattel rather than citizens and enslaved rather than liberated. For African Americans, Jefferson's glorious assertion that all men are created equal is just a duplicitous echo and his heroism tainted by his ownership of slaves and his unacknowledged and long hidden relationship with his slave Sally Hemings. There are no moral absolutes in this, only ambiguity. Jefferson is neither complete villain nor absolute hero but rather he is all of these things, slave owner, nation founder, architect, genius, and frail human. Our building too speaks of classical beauty and of exclusion. Can we acknowledge in our work that most important objects have multiple meanings depending on the background and experiences of the observer? Can we leave room in all we do for diverse voices and multiple perspectives? Can we examine carefully the inadvertent and often subtle messages that we convey in our buildings and our exhibition halls about exclusion and inclusion?

Drayton Hall is an eighteenth century Georgian mansion on the banks of the Ashley River just west of Charleston, South Carolina. The family that built it owned it until 1974 when it was given to the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The Drayton family owned slaves prior to the American Civil War and farmed the property and operated the house with their labor. No evidence remains of the enslaved Africans except for the overgrown, unkempt slave cemetery hidden in the trees at some distance behind the house. But the house is remarkably well preserved and has been left unfurnished which heightens the drama and exercises the imagination. I have always been drawn to the site perhaps because it is entirely real. No guesses at wall or floor coverings here. No furniture of the type the family might have had. No sections of the house reconstructed to look as it was "at the time." The house is "as is."

On a beautiful but chilly fall day I took a tour of the house with a group of people. As we toured I noted that two people on the tour were of African descent. I also saw that they stood to the side in each room and had intense conversations. One person was an older woman and the other boy in late adolescence, likely her son. Their discussion was particularly heated in a second floor room. The room had a fireplace surmounted by a carved heraldic crest. I guiltily listened to their conversation. "That," she told him, pointing to the carving, "is your family crest." "That crest has nothing to do with me," he caustically replied. Later I walked up to her and introduced myself. "You seem to have a personal connection to this place," I said. "Yes," she replied, "all of my ancestors worked here as slaves and some stayed on even after abolition. This was our family home." I asked if she had visited before. "No," she said softly, "I brought my son, but we see things very differently." I think about how she felt looking at the plantation where her family was enslaved. Her emotions seemed bittersweet. The place held her roots, but tragedy was implicit here. For me this was an imaginary journey into circumstances that my family never endured. For the woman's son this was a place to be forgotten because of a sense of shame and anger directed at the past that had treated his ancestors so cruelly. For the woman and her son, despite their differences, walking in the staircases and rooms of Drayton Hall was an intensely personal drama. They walked in the footsteps of grandmothers and grandfathers. For me it was a lesson in empathy. Can I put myself in the shoes of slaves and slave descendants? Can I imagine how it must have felt to be a slave in this place? Can I imagine the pathos and the resentment that African Americans experience at this place? Can we all learn lessons in empathy through our knowledge of the past, and can we apply those lessons learned in the present? The world can be a better place if we walk a little way in each other's shoes. Museums are the perfect place to experience empathy, to look at the world through the eyes of others who lived in different places, at different times, and in different circumstances. Objects and images are our business. Every one of them is a potential mnemonic device, a touchstone for memory, an opportunity for important discussion.

Museums exist for people, living, dead, and unborn. These institutions are places where the boundaries between past, present, and future are permeable and the interconnections apparent. Museums are never passive although some people struggle to make them so. Shortly after the Enola Gay controversy rocked the Smithsonian Institution's Air and Space Museum, I sat on a bench near the truncated fuselage of the B-29 bomber that unleashed the nuclear age on the people of Hiroshima. Curators had originally attempted to examine the atomic bombing of Japan two perspectives: one, from the point of view of American armed forces mired in the war in the Pacific Islands for whom the bomb represented triumph and saved countless lives that would have been lost in an invasion of Japan. But the curators also intended to present another perspective, that of those Japanese upon whom the bomb fell in a firestorm of unprecedented death, destruction, and lingering effects of radiation. The reaction of American veterans was ferocious -- and effective. The exhibition was truncated and most interpretation excised. As I thought about the exhibit's history, two women, one American and one Japanese, gazed into the gaping bomb bay from which such destruction has fallen. The American woman gestured to the other and pointed into the bomb rack. "How," she asked, "do you feel when you look up in there?" The Japanese paused a moment and then responded, asking in turn the other woman's response. The conversation that many had tried hard to preclude happened right there despite every attempt to suppress it. As the women talked a crowd gathered around them. A respectful un-orchestrated discussion ensued. The important questions were asked and answered despite the museum's effort to suppress just that conversation.

We museum professionals can no longer claim ultimate authority in what our artifacts, our collections mean. Nor can we assert interpretative control over the past. We are preservers, facilitators, conveners so that the conversations can take place and the stories be told and more importantly shared. This is who we really are, who we must be.